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ABSTRACT

To view knowledge of a foreign language only as a classroom tool is limiting for any young person, and especially so for the black student. "What good will study of a foreign language do me?" is a legitimate question for any student to ask. For one thing, foreign language study liberates the mind. Beginning with the first contact with a foreign language, students develop a new perception of reality. Black students learn "indelibly and irrefutably" that minority status does not mean inferior. In addition to these humanistic reasons, there are also career-related reasons for foreign language study. Job opportunities open up in various areas for persons who, in addition to training in specialized areas, also have developed competence in a foreign language. Teachers, administrators and students themselves must see that Blacks receive training that will qualify them for superior positions and give them the flexibility needed for career adjustment. Both students and administrators must insist that good instruction and the opportunity to develop language skills are made available in the foreign language class. (AMH)

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FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDY AND THE BLACK STUDENT

By Louise J. Hubbard

What good will it do me? This question being asked by all students today is prompting institutions of higher education to provide programs with built-in answers. Course requirements for graduation are being evaluated with the result that in many instances study of foreign languages has been dropped or the number of required courses decreased. In many high schools and colleges students may choose subjects that will serve them best as they and perhaps a counselor perceive their needs. Black students in the past were usually counseled out of the foreign language field with the reasoning that the subject would be too difficult and that they would never need it. As the choice today becomes theirs to make, black students become a part of mainstream America that sees no benefits in academic study of a foreign language.

Interest in the study of foreign languages in the United States rises and falls. This interest rose to new highs in the 60's with a widespread awareness that Americans must be able to communicate directly with persons of other countries. Recognizing a vital need for a large number of Americans to have competence in foreign languages, the federal government made funds available. As a result classroom teachers of foreign languages were retrained in methods that seemed to guarantee a truly bilingual student. Now in the mid 70's, as foreign language educators analyze the lack of success with the new techniques, methodology is seen as just one of several factors that influence performance in the foreign language classroom. American interest in foreign languages has again declined as the benefits of foreign language study are obscured by failure of the classroom to produce fluent speakers of foreign languages. More important is the influence of national policy. National opinion that a knowledge of foreign languages is unnecessary is demonstrated as international affairs of the United States continue to be handled through translators.

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It is not surprising, then, for black students to recognize only the possible need for a reading knowledge of a foreign language in their field of interest if they undertake graduate studies. Many students decide that if the time should come, they will take a one semester reading course and know all the foreign language required. Would that we had statistics on the number of students with no previous foreign language study who have seen their progress toward an advanced degree blocked when they discovered that learning a foreign language involves more than memorizing a set of synonyms. To view knowledge of a foreign language only as a classroom tool is shortsighted and limiting for any young person, and especially so for the black student. "What good will it do me?" The answer will come through clearly if all interference such as the following is removed. Dispel the myth of predestined failure for black students in foreign language study. There are no special problems for the black student with foreign languages any more than for the white student. Indeed, consider the report of a study made at Ohio State University which suggests that "black college students are likely to be successful in a foreign language course, even though they may have difficulties with all their other subjects."[1] Dispel also the myth that language learning should be all fun and games. Learning a foreign language requires time and effort just like learning anything else that calls for development of skills. Students are right to ask "What good will it do me?" before investing their time and effort.

Study of a foreign language opens one's eyes. More specifically it opens one's mind. It does more. Foreign language study liberates the mind. Black students, bound to their role in their community, in their city, in our nation, are released from that bondage. The beginning learner discovers that the lips, the tongue, the organs of speech are not made to be moved in one way only, the American way of moving them to say the letters "r," "s," or the words "hello," "goodbye," or any other sounds of the English language. The beginning learner discovers that the sounds that result when we move our lips this way, or that

[1] Jane Kollaritsch, "Success of Black Students in Foreign Languages," *College Student Personnel*, 14, No. 1 (January, 1973), 92.

way, when we put the tongue here or there, are neither derisory nor unacceptable, and that aptness in habituating the speech organs to produce the new and different sounds is praiseworthy. The learner discovers that words naming such ordinary objects as a house or a loaf of bread refer to objects in a different culture quite unlike those he envisions; that speakers of English see a table as having a leg; the speaker of French sees its foot. A man has a leg and a foot, as does a dog or a cat; not so to the Spanish speaker who uses a completely different word for the leg of a man and that of an animal, the word for an animal's leg including also the foot. Beginning with the first contact with a foreign language, students develop a new perception of reality. They begin to understand that what you experience determines what you can say, that what you can say limits what you think. The German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein expressed it thus, "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world." Study of a foreign language enables the learner to escape self-defeating provincialism, to look objectively at his world. Black students, through foreign language study, as by no other means, learn indelibly and irrefutably that minority status does not mean inferior, that different means neither better nor worse. Study of a foreign language can, as no other subject, develop self-confidence in the learner. Reinert explains, "Each language which a person can control gives him another way of understanding the world, another insight into reality. The greater his understanding of reality, the better chance he has of exerting some control over reality and having real control of his own destiny."[2] It is, of course, the goal of students to succeed in their studies. For one reason or another everyone does not always reach that goal. Honest failure in foreign language study, in my experience, does not nullify the acquisition of a new view of reality nor the liberation of the mind.

"What good will it do me?" What good will foreign language study do the black student who has no interest in becoming a teacher of foreign languages? There are job opportunities in various areas for the person who, in addition to training for a special job market, has also developed competence in a foreign

[2] Harry Reinert, "Truth in Packaging . . . for Foreign Languages," *Modern Language Journal*, 56 (April, 1972), 208.

language. American industrial involvement on an international scale increases yearly. Import-export businesses and branches of American companies are located in many countries. The owners and managers of such companies know the fallacy of the American excuse for avoiding foreign language study that "Everybody over there speaks English." Even the tourist who has carefully kept to the tourist trail has noticed that advertisements of American products abroad are in the language of the foreign country. The American secretary who can work in the desired foreign language as well as in English is a rarity. American firms in other countries seek personnel who, in addition to their ability to do the job, have also linguistic skills and cultural understanding. Professor Gould of the Department of Journalism at Wichita State University cites the "desperate" need of journalists who are fluent in a foreign language and have an understanding of foreign nations and people. He asserts that "the substantive knowledge necessary for a foreign correspondent worthy of the name, comes largely from an academic experience enriched by the study of cultures through their languages.[3]

Having a limited usage of a foreign language opens up job opportunities. The person who has prepared only to qualify for his job preference cannot compete with the person who presents a broader preparation. Employers who cannot find the wanted personnel with language competency frequently select the applicant who by prior language experience evidences capability for language training. For positions concerned with human relations, the person with the understandings acquired through foreign language study has the advantage. A limited knowledge of certain foreign languages is extremely useful in many areas. In places with a large Spanish-speaking population, for instance, persons in medical occupations, workers in social service, policemen, and city officials with a functional use of Spanish make their work satisfying to themselves as well as open avenues for advancement. In areas where foreign nationals are frequent visitors, competent personnel in all aspects of

[3] Loyal Gould, "Languages in Communication: Expanded Opportunities for Language Majors in Business and Industry," *Bulletin of the Association of Departments of Foreign Languages*, 4, No. 3 (March, 1973), 34-36.

hotel, restaurant, and retail store service who have in addition foreign language capability are prized. For Blacks, as we know, getting and keeping employment is difficult. In competition for a position the equal qualifications of the black applicant too often become less than sufficient. This can be offset by that extra qualification, which in many instances is the ability to handle another language and understand another culture. Clifton R. Wharton, Jr., president of Michigan State University, cautions against the limitations of career training, "an overconcentration of Blacks and other minorities in career-oriented educational programs may bar them from entering important occupational or leadership activities which require a wide understanding of the inheritance of man."[4] Nor should Blacks be content with the minimum amount of training which prepares only for the lowest-ranking positions. Teachers and administrators as well as students themselves must see that black students receive training that will qualify them for superior positions and give them the flexibility needed for career adjustment. The successful person in all areas has more than the minimum requirements. The successful person has also ease of expression, the ability to communicate ideas clearly and effectively. A benefit of even a minimal amount of foreign language study is the insight it gives to the learner into the nature of his own language. Word study and vocabulary growth exercises in one's own language do not surpass the understandings gained in foreign language study of the influence of words.

The white American is no better off in this respect than the black American, some might say, since many colleges of all sizes have dropped or altered their requirements for foreign language study. Consider that the prestigious colleges, models for smaller colleges, have kept or in a number of cases have increased the admission requirements in foreign languages. Consider the many study abroad programs for high school and college students. How many Blacks have been able to afford this excellent and expensive way to acquire foreign language skills? The substitute opportunity exists in our secondary schools and colleges. If the institutions, do not require study

[4] Clifton R. Wharton, Jr., "Toward a Liberal *and* Career Education," *Ebony*, 28, No. 1 (September, 1973), 100.

of a foreign language, should not black students require it of themselves? Consider the young people who spend school vacations abroad with no fixed goals. How many are black students? How many black students can afford the luxury of a summer of idleness? Who is being shortchanged when foreign language requirements are dropped? Who is being shortchanged when the inner-city high school and the urban college administrators and counselors of black students throughout the United States say: "If you take typing and other business subjects, foreign languages are of no value to you"; when they say in 1975: "Foreign languages are too hard for our students, and they'll never need them"? As in all fields of of study, there are teachers of foreign languages who are not committed to their profession. Students have a great deal of influence over the quality of instruction they receive. They and administrators must insist that good instruction and the opportunity to develop foreign language skills are made available in the foreign language class.

Frequently the comment is made that the person who does not plan to be a foreign language specialist cannot predict which foreign language may be needed later in life, or that everything learned will be forgotten by the time a need for it arises. Thus, it is reasoned that it is better to wait until one is sure which foreign language will be of value to the individual. It is often possible that a match can be made of future vocation and foreign language need. In an area with a large population of French or Spanish speakers, persons preparing for medical or city service jobs, among others, would do well to develop competency in the language that is widely spoken. On the other hand, the initial study of a foreign language gives the never-to-be-forgotten information on how languages work. If a need develops for competency in a different foreign language, the major groundwork has been done; the learning of a second foreign language is quicker and easier. If the language studied is needed many years later, a reading knowledg for a graduate degree, perhaps, this can be developed through self-study with far less effort and time than that needed by the one who has no basic information. If oral fluency is needed, the supposedly forgotten skills will surface after renewal of exposure to the lan-

guage, and on this foundation progress to competency will be accelerated.

Over forty years ago Professor W. Napoleon Rivers urged the black student to specialize in Romance languages "in order to (1) increase his knowledge of the history and literature of his race; (2) to combat falsehood with truth, by searching the sources in these languages and bringing to light important facts which have been obscured, falsified, or omitted, and to rehabilitate distinguished personages of African descent who have contributed richly to world culture but have been detracted or omitted in books printed in the English language . . ."[5] Since that time Blacks have located and disseminated much information about their ethnic heritage. Today with an awareness of his past, the black student must come to terms with himself, understand who he is as an individual, and forge a place for himself in American life. The liberating experience of foreign language study opens a way.

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[5] W. Napoleon Rivers, "Why Negroes Should Study Romance Languages and Literatures," *Journal of Negro History*, 19 (April, 1934), 119.